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A Post-Modern Military for a Post-Modern Country*

David Rudd
CISS President & Executive Director
Strategic Datalink #132
December, 2005

Nobody picks no fights in Canada
At least with no one they don't know
Nobody picks no fights in Canada
Wars ended a long, long time ago

Nobody drops no bombs on Canada
Wouldn't want to send no one to hell
Nobody drops no bombs on Canada
Folks tend to wish each other well

Billy Bishop Goes to War (1978)

The two stanzas come from a musical play, a tongue-in-cheek portrayal of the exploits of the famous First World War Canadian flying ace who, by one account, shot down more enemy aircraft in that conflict than any other British Commonwealth fighter pilot.[1]

The lyric, like the rest of the play, illustrates the perennial dilemma facing Canadians when contemplating the existence of an organization constituted to employ armed force to resolve disputes. Like Bishop, Canadians live in a peaceful country where the first line of protection is codes of law. Citizens generally do not conceive of circumstances in which the picking of fights, the shooting of guns or the dropping of bombs are permissible in the normal course of everyday life. This was true in Bishop's time, not least because life was highly domestic; Canadians were devoting their energies toward the building of a new country. They were aware of the goings-on in the outside world, but quite likely took less notice of them than their descendants who inhabit a globalizing, media-saturated, interdependent world.

But even though Bishop's Canada was one that enjoyed geographical protection from the 'evils' of the outside world, the Canada of the early 20th century was an outpost of the British Empire and, apart from nationalist/isolationist sentiment in Quebec, quite proud of it. In the English-speaking provinces there was healthy support for Britain's imperial ventures, including the Boer War. Although Canada was legally obligated to follow England's lead into the First World War, Canadians happily went along with it, signing up for military service in droves.

Of course, they did so for very specific reasons. Chief among them was the sense that Canada needed to stand firmly beside the 'Mother Country' in its hour of need. There was little sense of what threat to Canada's existence was posed by Imperial Germany, even though the Germany of the early 20th century was an expansionist, militaristic power. (Some would have said the same about Imperial Britain, although one tends to go easier on one's own side.) But the German state of Bishop's time was not the ultra-expansionist, hate-filled regime of a generation later. So as the second great conflagration

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loomed, Prime Minister MacKenzie King had a somewhat clearer sense of Canada's national interests and what had to be done to safeguard them. Consequently, Ottawa did not declare war immediately in 1939. It eventually did so not soley on the grounds that Canada should automatically rush to Britain's side, but rather on a sober appraisal of what dangers Nazi power, if left unchecked, posed to the civilized world.

There is a certain degree of continuity between Billy Bishop's Canada and the Canada of today. Both are (or were) undergoing a process of constant re-invention, content to go about their business, feeling largely invulnerable from contemporary security threats, but when stirred able to muster the resolution, resources, and talent that surprise(d) even themselves.

But while Bishop and many of his colleagues were champions in their field, and were celebrated for their exploits, it is difficult to imagine the same level of public enthusiasm for any cause involving the use of armed force today - or for any individual participating in such activity. The 'peaceable kingdom' hailed in the lyric is back, only this time it is a mirror image of Bishop's Canada. On the one hand it is globally engaged, and on the other ambivalent about what risks it is prepared to assume to see the collective will be done. Instead of being inward-looking but ready to do battle with the Empire's enemies, it is outward-looking but eager to stay out of major military (or what it perceives to be neo-imperial) entanglements - at least those which hold out the prospect of killing and being killed.

This is not to say that today's soldiers, sailors and aircrew are unworthy of public accolade. Indeed, many have been recognized with a range of military decorations. But these do not tend to garner much public attention. Nor do they compare to the attention and honours given to, say, General Romeo Dallaire, whose spectacular (but not singular) failure to protect Rwandan Tutsis from mass slaughter eventually yielded media lionization, literary fame, a placement at a prestigious American university, and a seat in the Canadian Senate. Not to say that the individual in question was not deserving of these honours. But judging from the dearth of similar honours given to other high-ranking officers, one may argue that Canadians are more apt to celebrate military figures who have demonstrated great conscience as opposed to military prowess. It is the 'tragic heroes' that capture the minds and hearts of Canadians (or at least their media and cultural élites) rather those who have succeeded in thwarting the forces of evil.[2]

Admittedly, this is an extrapolation of a more complex political reality. Canadians may be inclined to pacific solutions but are not collec-

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tively pacifist. They have been tested both politically and militarily in recent small-scale conflicts and have carried the day. National unity and military capacity have been strained, but not quite to the breaking point. While recent polls indicate a preference for allegedly safer, more 'politically correct' missions (i.e. classical peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance)[3] the public's views of military matters may be more sophisticated; they may include an unspoken recognition that even safe missions may require robust rules of engagement and the option of resorting to force beyond mere self-protection.

Courtesy of DND

If there is a collective reluctance to engage in physical confrontations it may be because there is a weak consensus on what, if anything, is worth the price. Is there even a sense that the 'evil' referred to above can be defined? What are Canada's vital interests? What are its sacred values? Do Canadians have values that they delude themselves into thinking are sacred?

This is a conversation that Canadians and their governments seem unwilling to have, as evidenced by the way in which the International Policy Statement (released in April of 2005) tap-danced around the issue of what would bring every element of national power to bear. This was not an accidental omission; it was quite deliberate.

Canada's Defence Policy Statement further reflected this ambivalence. While calling for combat-capable military forces, the statement specified their use only in situations short of state-on-state conflict. Indeed, the term 'war-fighting' was nowhere to be found in the document. Henceforth the Canadian military will sally forth only to shore up fragile or failing states – a noble calling to be sure, and one that still may call for sacrifices of blood and treasure. But it is difficult to argue that these missions will call upon the *entire* Canadian people to put their personal concerns aside in favour of a truly national effort. Future military expeditions into distant lands will resemble not the great struggles of the 20th century (and for this Canadians can be grateful) but rather what Edward Luttwak called "post-heroic warfare"[4], where core national interests are not at stake. In such cases, the population may be divided over the wisdom or necessity of being involved in someone else's problem. Therefore the exploits of, or sacrifices made by, the nation's military are less likely to capture the general public's imagination, or earn its gratitude.

The dissolution of the national consensus (assuming there was one to begin with) over the acceptability of using armed force as an instrument of national policy may also explain the decision, taken during the 1980s and without fanfare, to drop the word 'armed' from Canadian Armed Forces. A country that cannot bear to speak its military's name, or to acknowledge its essential purpose – the instrument through which the violence, or the implied threat of violence is employed to further national goals – may be pacific at heart and politically enlightened. It may also be naïve or self-delusional.

One thing is sure: Canada's relatively peaceful history has spawned a political culture that favours basic freedoms and the supremacy of law, that balances individualism with collectivism, that favours for quiescent nationalism rather than melodramatic jingoism, and that strives toward social stability. These principles were embodied in the 'peace, order, and good government' mantra adopted at the time of Confederation. What is relevant to this discussion is that Canada's political culture has yielded a particular 'security culture', one that is pragmatic to a fault, usually hesitant to take action, softly anti-American, and nearly always virtuous in Canadians' own eyes. This culture shies away from the appli-

cation of military force in *most* circumstances. This can be a laudable outcome if, as in the case of Iraq, the recourse to force was hasty or premature. It may not be so praiseworthy in other case - Srebrenica, Rwanda, Darfur, Democratic Republic of the Congo leap to mind - where ineffectual diplomatic efforts and United Nations Security Council resolutions are backed up with nothing more than hand-wringing, at the cost of thousands or even millions of lives.

Where do Canadians find themselves today? For better or worse, many are inclined to see their armed forces through the lens of contemporary US foreign policy, as if there was no distinction between the security cultures and the foreign and defence policies of the two neighbours. In fact there are as many differences as there are similarities. Therefore, what the current US administration is up to is largely irrelevant to this discussion. Canadians should have an on-going conversation about their military, regardless of who is sitting in the White House.

With its International and Defence Policy Statements the federal government made a number of decisions regarding the future of the Canadian military. The first and most important among these is that Canada will in fact have a military. That in itself is significant, in that it rejects pacifism as a panacea for the world's ills. The abolition of the organization – a course of action favoured by some - is not on the horizon. But nor is there an acceptance that problems will be amenable to military solutions. Indeed, most will not. Thus a vastly larger and powerful military – another course of action favoured by some – is not in the cards. So while one can certainly dream, the two extremes of the debate will have little or no standing in the debate over how large or capable the Canadian Forces will be in the immediate future.

While Canadians may favour the safe, easy missions over the difficult and dangerous ones, they should not fool themselves into thinking that the former will be sufficient to achieve national goals, whatever they may be. Is it intellectually defensible to support participation in so-called 'traditional' (i.e. blue beret) peacekeeping and not in its modern variations (i.e. Afghanistan)? Both missions have the same goal: to help wounded parties work out their problems and regain their strength so they may live and prosper. The fact that the level of danger inherent in each type of mission differs is of questionable relevance. To argue that participation in the former type of mission is becoming of Canada and participation in the latter is not (even when the goals are the same) suggests that Canadians are uncertain of what means are acceptable in pursuit of the ends; they are uncertain of the extent of their commitment to the well-being of others, or their 'responsibility to protect'. The collective will to assume risks in the name of international peace and security may be impressively broad. It may also be deceptively shallow.

Still, the desire to be a peacekeeper/humanitarian and little more makes sense so long as Canadians see no external military threats to national survival, nor anything else truly worth fighting for. Thus despite the recent policy announcements, Canadians will have much leeway in deciding how their military is structured, and under what circumstances it will be deployed.

To summarize, Canada has a military. It will have one for the foreseeable future. It is likely to be modest in size and capability. It will be composed of highly-trained personnel serving under the unlimited liability clause. It will be armed. It will have a flexible mandate, ranging from core tasks that only it can perform, to ancillary ones shared with unarmed domestic and international actors. That mandate will stem as much from a realistic view of how the world is, as from an idealistic view of the type of world Canadians want to create. In short, Canada will have a military that is 'as Canadian as possible under the circumstances.'[5]

Notes:

*Based on a presentation to the Calgary Institute for the Humanities, 16 June, 2005.

[1] Shores, Christopher. Air Aces. Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1983.

[2] For a comparison of how the Canadian media treats the commanders of different missions, see Off, Carol. The Lion, the Fox and the Eagle. Toronto: Random House, 2001.

[3] Lane Anker, "Peacekeeping and Public Opinion", Canadian Military Journal, Vol. 6, no. 2 (2005), 23-32.

[4] Edward Luttwak, "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare", Foreign Affairs, May/June, 1995.

[5] Heather Scott, on CBC Radio's *This Country in the Morning*, 1972.

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